

Hamlet Study Guide Questions

You must answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper IN COMPLETE SENTENCES. The purpose of this assignment is to help you to stay engaged in the text as we read and also to give you a basis for your comments in the discussions we will have in class about the text. A suggestion would be that as we read make notes of where the answers to these questions can be found on this sheet so that you can easily go back later and answer these questions. These questions start out very basic, generally about plot and character, in the first few acts and then move to more reflective questions in the later acts. Please be aware that not all the questions are in chronological order or in any order whatsoever. The answers to the questions will be due on the day we start reading the next act in class.

ACT I

Scene 1

1. Give three specific phrases which establish an ominous mood?
2. Why are there preparations for war?
3. When the ghost enters, what questions does Horatio bravely pose to discover the ghost's purpose?
4. How does the following quote fit with the Elizabethan view of the universe: "This bodes some strange eruption to our state."?

Scene 2

1. What does Laertes ask permission to do?
2. What does Gertrude ask Hamlet to do? What is her view of death?
3. In lines 85-88 what does Hamlet say about the outward show of sorrow?
4. What does Claudius say about Hamlet's sorrow?
5. In lines 135-139: what image is used to describe the world?
6. What is Hamlet's view of his mother's marriage?
7. What does Hamlet think that the ghost indicates?

Scene 3

1. What does Laertes warn Ophelia about in regards to her relationship with Hamlet?
2. List six pieces of advice that Polonius gives to Laertes as he leaves for college.
3. What is Ophelia's response to both her brother's and her father's warning?

Scene 4

1. In lines 15-35: what does Hamlet mean by "some vicious mole"?
2. What are Horatio's concerns about the ghost?

Scene 5

1. Who is the ghost? Where is the ghost from? Why has he returned?
2. What do the words, "O my prophetic soul" indicate?
3. How was King Hamlet murdered? What made it especially horrible?
4. What warning does the ghost give Hamlet in regards to himself and his mother? Why do think this is? How do you think Hamlet will react to this?
5. Why does Hamlet swear the men to secrecy?
6. What does Hamlet mean when he says he will "put an antic disposition on"?
7. What does he mean when he says, "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right"? How could Hamlet possibly go about setting what is already doing, "right"? Do think that after he does this things will be set "right"?

ACT II

Scene 1

1. How much time has passed between Act 1 and Act 2? How do you know?
2. What is Polonius telling Reynaldo to do? What does this tell up about Polonius and his way of thinking and acting?
3. Why is Ophelia so upset when she enters at 2.1.74.1? What has happened to her? How well has she obeyed her father's orders in 1.3?
4. What is Polonius' response to what Ophelia tells him? Where are they going?

(ACT II – continued)

Scene 2

1. Why have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to court? What is their relation to Hamlet? What use does Claudius have for them?
2. What are the several different explanations of Hamlet's madness? Are people content with these explanations? Are you?
3. How effective is Polonius as a bearer of news? How convinced are Claudius and Gertrude that Polonius has found the answer? How do they plan to test this answer?
4. Immediately following the discussion of the plan, Hamlet appears. How does Hamlet behave when he enters? Does Polonius think he is mad? Is this the way we would expect Hamlet to act?
5. How does Hamlet behave initially with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (through 2.2.216-66)? Is it different from the way he just acted with Polonius? How does Hamlet change when he realizes that the two were sent for by Claudius and Gertrude?
6. What play does Hamlet want the players to play? What does he want to do to the play?
7. Read Hamlet's third soliloquy carefully (2.2.526-82). How does he use the player's response to show how different his own position is?
8. Hamlet complains that he hasn't acted on his vengeance. Why hasn't he? Why does he need the play? What will he learn from it?

ACT III

Scene 1

1. According to Hamlet's famous soliloquy, what prevents him from committing suicide?
2. When Hamlet tells Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery," what are his feelings about her and about mankind in general?
3. What has Claudius decided about Hamlet's madness, and what does he plan to do?

Scene 2

1. What does the player king say about love and success?
2. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks," is a very famous line. What does it mean?
3. What is the name of the play? What is ironic about the name of this play? In the play what is the relationship between the King and the murderer? What is Hamlet trying to do by putting on this play?
4. What is Claudius's reaction to the play?
5. What is Hamlet's state of mind in lines 404-406?

Scene 3

1. What is the King going to do with Hamlet?
2. The climax of the play is said to be the King's soliloquy in lines 40-75. Is the King's repentance sincere? How do we know one way or the other? Why would people say that this is the climax of the play?
3. In the soliloquy, what does he say?
4. What prevents Hamlet from killing Claudius right there? Is this a good reason? What does this show about Hamlet's character?

Scene 4

1. Hamlet accuses Gertrude of which of the seven deadly sins?
2. Why does the ghost come back? What would be the purpose for Shakespeare of having the ghost come back? (Think about the connection to the entire work)
3. In lines 179-186, Hamlet gives his mother some good advice about how to change a difficult bad habit. What was that advice?
4. What is Hamlet's response to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What is the mandate they bear?

ACT IV

1. Claudius begins and ends the act by lying to Gertrude. Name four other aspects of his character and prove them on the basis of what he says and does in this act. Does he feel guilt?
2. Has Gertrude reformed after her confrontation with Hamlet?
3. What is Gertrude's tragedy?
4. In what ways does Hamlet appear to change during this act?
5. When Laertes speaks in this act, particularly in Scene 5, he often uses hyperbolic expressions. What might this imply about him and give an example of one of his hyperbolic expressions.
6. Why has Ophelia gone mad? How might this be proven? What do others think is the cause of her madness? What does that say about them?
7. What does the Queen's speech about Ophelia's drowning suggest about the young woman's madness and the reasons for her death?
8. Ophelia has been associated with flowers from the beginning of the play? Go back and find what some of those flowers are and give the line numbers here. Now the flowers have changed to weeds. What does this suggest?
9. Why are there so many short scenes in this act?
10. Find two quotes that demonstrate disease imagery in Scene 3.
11. Find two quotes that demonstrate disease imagery in Scene 4.
12. How does Gertrude's line about disease in Scene 5 define all the disease imagery in the play?
13. What do Scene 5 and Scene 7 suggest about what the commitment to revenge does to people?
14. What is Hamlet not seeing or addressing in the last soliloquy of Scene 7.

ACT V

1. What is the point of the gravedigger's riddles and songs?
2. In what ways do Hamlet's reactions to the skulls in the graveyard seem to suggest a change in his outlook?
3. How old is Hamlet? Why might this be important?
4. What is the violent argument between Hamlet and Laertes about? Who is right?
5. What does Shakespeare use to raise suspense during the graveyard scene?
6. What is missing in Hamlet's discussion with Horatio considering the end of Scene 1?
7. What developments in Hamlet's character are presented through his discussion with Horatio about what happened on the boat? Horatio is surprised by something: what is it?
8. How do Hamlet's motives in killing Claudius seem to have shifted according to his speech beginning with the line, "Does it not think thee..."
9. Why does Hamlet "defy augry"?
10. Discuss the biblical allusion (about the sparrow) in Hamlet's brief speech. What does it imply?
11. What does Laertes say is his motive in still resenting Hamlet? How has he already lost this?
12. What does Shakespeare use to raise suspense during the fencing match?
13. How does this contribute to the presentation of revenge in the play?
14. Hamlet refers to Claudius as "this canker of our nature." What makes this so appropriate?
15. How might the dying lines of Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes be viewed? Where do their last words leave them as a character at the end of the play?
16. Which characters view the ending of the play as a bloody carnage and which view it as poetic justice? Why the confusion?
17. Who "wins" in Hamlet? How?